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Vestibular Disease

Vestibular disease occurs in older, medium to large breed dogs and is characterized by a sudden onset of a loss of balance, abnormal eye movements, head tilt and incoordination. These signs may be preceded or accompanied by nausea and vomiting. The cause of this condition is unknown but the signs suggest an abnormality in the vestibular region of the brain. The vestibular system includes the inner ears and is the area of the brain which is responsible for balance.

The initial signs of this disease can be alarming and incapacitating, but the prognosis for a rapid improvement and recovery is excellent. The vomiting and nausea and the abnormal eye movements typically improve within 72 hours. The head tilt and ataxia (loss of balance) gradually improve over the next 7-10 days. Most dogs have a complete recovery within 2-3 weeks, but occasionally a slight head tilt may remain. The signs rarely reoccur.

Treatment is supportive care, being sure to keep them hydrated. Anti-vomiting drugs and drugs for motion sickness may help keep the dog comfortable until the symptoms improve. Occasionally sedation is necessary if the dog is severely disoriented. Dogs with vestibular signs may need support while walking for the first few days, and should be kept cool and away from stairs to prevent injury while their balance is impaired.

Differential diagnosis for vestibular disease includes other conditions affecting the inner ear such as infection, neoplasia, trauma, and drug side effects. Physical exam, blood work, and x-rays may be needed to rule out these other conditions, but often the presentation and the rapid improvement confirm the diagnosis of vestibular disease.

Please call and discuss your pet's condition if there are any questions or concerns.